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A sinking feeling for Mitterrand

When the Rainbow Warrior went down in a New Zealand harbor, the credibility of the French government went with it.

The Greenpeace photographer killed when the second mine went off in Auckland is not the only casualty. The Socialist government of French President Francois Mitterrand is now implicated in more than the possible murder of an environmentalist in another country. It has been forced to admit sending teams of spies to New Zealand to infiltrate Greenpeace and monitor the movement's protest against French nuclear testing in the South Pacific.

Revelations in Le Monde and other journals last week lay bare the Mitterrand government's pathetic attempts to conceal the involvement of top military, intelligence and national security officials. With the kind of bumbling associated with Peter Sellers' incompetent detective, Inspector Clouseau, the French wind up with two spies in the dock in New Zealand, a political firestorm at home and an image of thuggery and deceit around the world. Hanging above it all is the stench of cover-up.

The official inquiry Mitterrand announced to try to contain the damage is now proven to be a sham. While Le Monde's and other press accounts fall short of direct proof, the denials of complicity in murder from French Defense Minister Charles Hernu, who resigned Friday, are less than convincing.

The fabled chauvinism of the French was typified by the initial my-country-right-or-wrong observation of Mitterrand's predecessor, Valery Giscard d'Estaing. France's apparent willingness to go to any length to foil peaceful protest against nuclear testing on Mururoa Atoll underscores the fragility of a world closeted with caches of nuclear weapons. This is not Libya or Iran or Pakistan we're talking about, but a government that bills itself as the most civilized on earth.

France's secret plan to unhinge the Greenpeace campaign represents an incomprehensible escalation of previous French efforts, which included the boarding of a Greenpeace vessel by the French Navy and the beatings of crewmen by French sailors.

Why would France go to such lengths? The affair is being called – what else? – France's under-Watergate. The massive over-reaction and incompetent handling recall Nixon administration decisions to countenance the invasion of the offices of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist and the Democratic National Committee.

With too much power, too much money and a deadened sense of right-versus-wrong, the French appear to have resorted to an elephant gun to kill a mouse, and are blowing up the government in the bargain. France has legislative elections early next year, and the prospect is for Mitterrand's Socialists to get clobbered, leaving him a lame-duck president for the final two years of his term. The French have a deliciously ironic word for such a condition of impotent government: cohabitation.

By becoming the first government to declare war on Greenpeace and inflict a fatality, France has blackened its reputation around the world. The concept of national honor, of which the French love to boast, is shredded.

Mitterrand's conservative opposition will goad the press into further examinations of this sordid business, and the French electorate will sort out the debris. But the implications of the underhanded French war on Greenpeace underscore the reality of a world gone mad for spying and covert action.

At the same time, France's defense minister has to call a press conference to declare he is not a murderer, the espionage activities of other nations are rampant.

The World Court at the Hague heard testimony from former CIA analyst David Macmichael that the Reagan administration authorized the CIA to invade Nicaragua with 1,500 Contra troops. Former Contra leader Edgar Chamorro claimed via affidavit that the CIA paid and organized the Contras and encouraged them in acts of brutality. "The United States government conceived, created and organized the mercenary forces," charged Nicaragua's lawyer, Harvard professor Abram Chayes.

In London and Moscow, moving firms did land-office business as Britain kept expelling alleged spies and the Soviets kept expelling Britons in retaliation. The West German government shudders because its chief counterspy and a key secretary in the chancellor's office defected to East Germany.

In Rome, the Pope's would-be assassain, Mehmet Ali Agca, was back in court as testimony resumed in the case against the Bulgarian-Turkish plotters Agca has implicated. In Manila, a lawyer in the Benigno Aquino murder trial accuses officers of the Philippine Air Force of plotting to kill the US ambassador.

At home, President Reagan tells reporters "The Walker case somehow doesn't seem to look as big as it did a short time ago now with what we've seen happening in the other countries."

What he didn't say is what needs to be said: The spying, plotting and conspiracies that governments are afraid to own up to are out of control and making the world a less safe place. We can't control other countries, but we can curb our own dirty operations, and it's past time we reined them in.

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